CONTEMPORARY SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE IN THE SCOTTISH PERIODICAL PRESS 1785–1807

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As far as I have been able to discover the first contemporary Scandinavian author to have his work presented in the Scottish periodical press was Sweden's great lyric poet Carl Michael Bellman (1740–1795). In 1785 the Edinburgh bookseller Charles Sibbald founded the *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* in competition with the *Scots Magazine* which had begun publication in 1739. Sibbald himself became its first editor. Into each of the periodical's first numbers he introduced a musical supplement, a neatly engraved song. Thus there appeared opposite page 432 of the first volume of the *Edinburgh Magazine* 'A Swedish Song' which turns out to be the first stanza of Bellman's 'Om Bacchus du är gud' accompanied by the appropriate melody. The Swedish text is only slightly distorted; there has been some misreading of Swedish handwriting. Text and melody are followed by a competent précis-translation,

> 'Bacchus, though thou art a god, and my Shepherdess is but a mortal, she has more power over me than all thy commandments:
> Nor would I drink this bumper, were it not to the health of my Charmer.'

Bellman's name does not appear as author.

The 'Swedish Song' may of course have been pirated after the fashion of the time from some 'musical miscellany' published elsewhere in the British Isles, but if that is not so, we have here what is possibly the first appearance of a poem by Bellman in the English-speaking world and of a translation of a Bellman poem into English. Unfortunately the great annotated edition of Bellman's works, *Bellman-sällskapets Standardupplaga,* which was begun in 1921, has not yet reached his minor drinking songs so no definitive information on the poem is available.

It was three years later, in 1788, that the *Edinburgh Magazine* made its second sally into contemporary Scandinavian literature, this time a double one. The contributor responsible gives us only his initials A.R.B.E.; I have been unable to discover who he was.

A.R.B.E.'s first contribution is *'A Danish Song'*. It appears, without a melody, on page 147 of vol. 7. The four-stanza poem is given in Danish with an English translation appended. The poem begins,

'BESTE Doras! engle pige . . .'

A.R.B.E.'s translation is good, giving the sense neatly and retaining the metrical form of the original, the first stanza reading,

'DORAS! dear, angelic creature,
fairest of the gentle fair,
Excellence of human nature,
Hear a lover's tender pray'r!'

The little poem goes on from conventional statement to conventional statement concluding with,

'For thy love I'd give, with pleasure,
Kingdoms, had I such to give;
And, with thee, beyond all measure
Bless'd, in humble cottage live.'

The authorship of the Danish original has completely baffled me. Not one of the many friends and colleagues in Denmark and elsewhere that I have pestered directly and indirectly has recognised it.

A.R.B.E.'s second offering appears on pages 307–308 of the same volume 7 of the *Edinburgh Magazine*. It is a version in Norwegian with an English translation of the most recited, most sung, most admired Norwegian poem of the time, Johan Nordahl Brun's 'Norges skaal' (For Norge, Kiaempers fødeland) which became in 1814 the Norwegian national anthem and remained so till it was replaced by Bjørnson's 'Ja, vi elsker.'

A.R.B.E. prefaces poem and translation – again no melody is given – with a short historico-literary note which shows that he was familiar with the poem's background,

> 'The following Song is the production of a Norwegian Priest, named Brun, and was expressly designed against the politics of Count Struensee, the unfortunate Danish Minister. It appeared in the year 1771, soon after the Norwegian lifeguard was disbanded, and when the liberty of the Press was introduced into the Danish Dominions. It was, and still is a favourite in Norway; and breathes such a spirit of liberty as is, now-a-days, purely ideal in that quarter of the world.'

In actual fact the poem did not 'appear' in A.R.B.E.'s sense, i.e. was not printed, till 1784 and his Norwegian text probably did not derive from that printing but is rather the product of oral transmission. It is more defiant than the standard version, uses colloquial verbal forms instead of literary ones, and, strangely enough, allows 'Norge' to be swamped by 'Norsk' in the two places when the country's name occurs.

A.R.B.E.'s translation is not a success. He transposes the third and fourth stanzas of the poem so that instead of closing with Brun's ninefold greeting by the mountains to the sons of Norway it closes with his conventional homage to 'wine, woman and song',

> 'Confusion seize him who loves thrall
> Who hates the fair, wine, songs and all.'

And A.R.B.E.'s Norwegian is just not up to the task he has set himself. For example, he translates the very first line of the poem, which in the distorted Norwegian version he had before him can only mean something like 'For Norwegian warriors' native land', by the surprising: 'To Norway's healthy clime, tho' cold.'

It was another nineteen years before anything else of any significance about contemporary Scandinavian literature appeared in the Scottish periodical press. This time it was the old

Scots Magazine, with which the *Edinburgh Magazine* had been amalgamated in 1803, that took up the torch with a quite remarkable double literary article on pages 409–412 and pages 889–890 of vol. 69(1807), *'An Essay on the Swedish* POETRY, *considered chiefly from the 17th century to the present time. Communicated by a Swedish gentleman'* and *'Farther particulars respecting* SWEDISH *Literature, with the translation of a poem from that language'.*

Though the Swedish gentleman's English provokes an occasional smile and there are plenty disturbing misprints the Essay is a well-balanced synopsis of the history of Swedish literature from the middle of the seventeenth century with Stiernhielm, Dalin, King Gustaf III, Kellgren and Bellman recognised as the main figures.

Stiernhielm's 'Hercules' is praised as his outstanding work but it is regretted that his language is so archaic. The Essay then mentions 'Samuel Columbus, Lucidor, Runius, Spegel, Mrs. Brenner, Wexionius etc., giving Runius pride of place and poking fun at Haquin Spegel's 'The works and repose of God.' Dalin's 'Argus', the little weekly periodical he wrote himself, is noted as eclipsing 'all Swedish prosaic (*sic*) writings of that day' and high honours are awarded to his 'History of our Country', his poem 'Swedish Liberty', his hymns, and his 'Tale of the Horse'.

King Gustaf III, Sweden's enlightened despot who was the contemporary of Frederick the Great and of Joseph II, is praised, after a bow to his own writing, for the founding of the Swedish Academy. From Gustaf's patronage of literature it is a natural step to the men who enjoyed that patronage. Among them the Essay very properly singles out Kellgren,

> '*Kellgren* stands in the first rank. In this man, we have seen united the most opposite talents. Either he charms our imagination in a high, sublime Ode; melts our hearts in a tender Drama, or makes us laugh at the expence of folly, pride and vanity; he is *collossally* great. As poet and prose writer, he is the first of his age, and, if equalled, not easily excelled.'

After Kellgren are mentioned the 'three Counts', Gyllenborg, Creutz and Oxenstierna. Oxenstierna is 'the Swedish Thomson' and Creutz's 'Atis and Camilla' is commended as 'a very elegant erotic (*sic*) poem.' At this point Franzén is introduced because of his elegy on Creutz but also as the author of 'perhaps the first of our Odes, *On the Fall (sic) of Man.*' A short notice on Lidner speaks of him as writing 'in a *Shakespearian sublimity,* irregularity and wildness' and claims that his 'The year 1783' and 'Medea' have been translated into English.

Then comes, appropriately, almost a full column devoted to Bellman. I quote at length, as it is fascinating to meet the 'Bellman Legend' fully developed and being exported abroad only twelve years after the poet's death,

> 'It was in a company of joyous (*sic*) fellows, made up mostly of the lower class of people, where his muse conceived these songs, which posterity, for their true anacreontic and humorous turns, cannot but admire. Of this kind are his *Epistles and Songs* of *Fredman,* a watchmaker, as the poet describes him, without watches, stock, or workshop, merely an ever-drinking and ever-thinking worshipper of Bacchus. All these songs were made extempore at certain taverns and inns (not of the first quality) in the metropolis, where his fellows seldom happened to fail of meeting their Bard: the author made the song and the tune often at once, and both were, by the care of some friend or admirer, who seized them in the moment of their birth, transmitted beyond the circles of the company, for the entertainment and pleasure of which they were alone intended.'

After Bellman we are on less sure ground with the Essayist's longish list of contemporaries. Among them Leopold is 'the principal of our now existing poets', 'our most correct prose writer' and 'one of our most profound philosophers.' There is praise too for his reform of Swedish orthography (1801) which produced the norm followed generally throughout the nineteenth century. Arlerbeth is 'the most correct of our poets' and is commended for his skill as a translator. Wallmark

'possesses a happy genius' and 'will certainly be a flattering ornament of the Swedish parnassus' – not a very good prophecy.

The Essay ends with a polite acknowledgment of the capabilities of 'Mrs. Nordenflycht' and 'Mrs. Lenngren.'

In the 'Farther Particulars' there is more about Arlerbeth and Wallmark, a note on Valerius, who has retained some mild popularity, and then, little to the point, an account of recent publications in the field of science. The most significant section is that devoted to Franzén. His poem has now its proper title, 'On the Face of Man' and it appears in a very reasonable translation. By bad luck 'behag' in the first stanza is rendered as 'charmer' instead of 'charms', certainly a misprint, but the rest reads well – it is in prose – and nobody will blame the Swedish gentleman for quietly omitting in his translation the most difficult stanza.

Once again I can offer no name for the writer of the two contributions. All that is certain is that he was a Swede. He, or his translator, had, despite the odd mistake, a remarkable command of English tinged on occasion with German; 'church-songs' appears at one point for 'hymns'. Whoever he was – perhaps somebody who had been at school in Scotland – he had a competent grip of his country's literature and the readers of the *Scots Magazine* got good measure and some reasoned critical opinions in what was possibly the first treatment of the subject in English.